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SUBJECT: EAP DAS Marciel and MFA DG for the Americas Exchange Views
on Moving Relations Forward in 2010

REF: HANOI 0001; HCMC 0672

CLASSIFIED BY: Virginia Palmer, Deputy Chief of Mission, State,
Hanoi; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1.(C) Summary: MFA DG for the Americas Nguyen Ba Hung told visiting DAS Marciel February 5 Vietnam was "ready to take cooperation to a new level." Ba Hung noted the GVN's willingness to assist Afghanistan, support a central U.S. role in the East Asia Summit, support the President's non-proliferation agenda, and encourage Burmese leaders to support national reconciliation. DAS Marciel reaffirmed the USG's commitment to relations with Vietnam, but cautioned that recent convictions of political dissidents, poor handling of Dong Chiem and Bat Nha, and proposed price controls could lead to questions about Vietnam's commitment to reform and the rule of law. Ba Hung did not take issue with the points, but encouraged the U.S. and Vietnam to discuss issues frankly. Ba Hung said former President Clinton had told PM Dung in Davos during the WEF that he was willing to travel to Vietnam in June, and perhaps his visit could be part of the commemoration of the 15th Anniversary. Ba Hung hinted the GVN was considering releasing Father Ly on humanitarian grounds to allow him to travel abroad for medical attention, but ruled out releasing Le Cong Dinh any time soon. End summary.

12. (SBU) The DCM hosted MFA DG for Americas Nguyen Ba Hung and EAP DAS and ASEAN Ambassador Marciel for a 90-minute working breakfast February 5. MFA Americas Deputy Director Vu Viet Dung and Americas Desk Officer Tran Thanh Tam accompanied Ba Hung. Political Counselor and Poloff completed the American side.

13. (C) Ba Hung opened the discussion by briefing DAS Marciel on several GVN "multilateral initiatives consistent with U.S. policy." Following up on Senator Bond's inquiry, pursuant to an agreement last year between the Afghan and Vietnamese governments, Vietnam is willing to provide assistance to Afghanistan, but progress has been slow due to "difficulties in Kabul." The Afghan government has sent the GVN a "long list of areas" where they need assistance, mostly in the agricultural sector, and the MFA hopes to devise a concrete program to assist. Specific ideas under consideration include bringing Afghans to rural Vietnam to observe poverty alleviation programs. Ba Hung did not say when he thought the GVN would respond to the Afghan laundry list, but noted the Foreign Ministry was trying to encourage other ministries, including Agriculture, to contribute. On the East Asia Summit, Ba Hung said that PM Dung (while in Davos for the WEF) reportedly endorsed the Indonesian FM's proposal for a strong role for the U.S. and Russia. "The U.S. can count on Vietnam's support," and Vietnam (as ASEAN chair) will encourage other ASEAN members to support the

initiative, Ba Hung said.

14. (C) Turning to Burma, Ba Hung praised the new U.S. policy and offered that Vietnam is urging Burmese leaders to open Burmese society and support national reconciliation. Burma "trusts" Vietnam and the Vietnamese ambassador ("a real China hand") in Rangoon has good relations with the Burmese leadership. Ba Hung noted GVN concern about growing Chinese influence in Burma and said it was important to strive for a "good, long-term solution between Burma and ASEAN," cautioning against pressing too hard for short-term results. DAS Marciel pushed back, noting it was important for Burmese leaders at a minimum to take concrete steps domestically and begin to play a positive role internationally. DAS Marciel encouraged the GVN to use its position as ASEAN chair and Burma's respect for Vietnam to encourage the Burmese leaders to do the right thing.

15. (C) On non-proliferation, Ba Hung said PM Dung wants to attend the President's Nuclear Summit "even though April is an important month domestically" (in the run-up to the January 2011 Communist Party Congress) in order to highlight to the Vietnamese people the importance of working with the U.S. and the larger international community on non-proliferation issues. Ba Hung confirmed the GVN's intention to sign the civilian nuclear MOU in Washington and issue a joint statement expressing its interest in initiating 1-2-3

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negotiations. Ba Hung reiterated PM Dung's desire for "a very brief official" Oval Office meeting (important to highlight to the Vietnamese the significance of non-proliferation issues) on the margins of a meeting with other ASEAN leaders. PM Dung also would like to see the National Security Advisor. DAS Marciel welcomed PM Dung's participation in the Summit and support for non-proliferation. He offered to relay the GVN's interest in an Oval Office meeting, but noted the difficulty of arranging bilateral meetings between more than 40 heads of state and the President on the margins of the Summit.

16. (C) Moving to the bilateral relationship, Ba Hung said the GVN was prepared "to take our cooperation to a new level." He deferred discussion of specifics to an unspecified future date, but said the GVN wished to use 2010 - the 15th anniversary of normalization of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam - to jump-start the process. Ba Hung said former President Clinton had told PM Dung recently that he was willing to travel to Vietnam in June, and perhaps his visit could be part of the commemoration of the 15th Anniversary. Ba Hung said the GVN wanted to highlight the anniversary because relations had progressed very far in a short time. Ba Hung expressed support for convening a symposium in Hanoi and said PM Dung would be interested in an exchange of letters with POTUS to commemorate the anniversary and to signal the importance of the relationship.

17. (C) DAS Marciel replied the President and the Secretary were committed to ASEAN and the region, and the USG is interested in deepening relations with Vietnam, given its positioning in the region and potential to bring about positive change here. However, the mood in Washington toward Vietnam was souring, with even Vietnam's traditional friends inside and outside of government expressing concerns about Vietnam's commitment to reform in light of a string of recent convictions of political activists, poor handling of Dong Chiem and Bat Nha incidents (refs. A-B), and proposed price controls. DAS Marciel raised the mounting pressure in Washington to re-designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) on religious freedom. Senior USG officials will continue to raise human rights, given their importance in the overall relationship and because lack hinders progress in other areas.

18. (C) Ba Hung expressed appreciation for DAS Marciel's frank assessment. He did not take issue with the points, but argued both sides have their "domestic constituencies" and encouraged the U.S. and VN to discuss our differences frankly. Ba Hung said these were "difficult" issues for GVN leaders. As "anti-Communist groups" in the U.S. criticize Vietnam on human rights and religious freedom, GVN leaders view this criticism through the "anti-communist" prism and harden their positions further. When the Executive Director of Boat People SOS travels to Malaysia and "incites" Vietnamese workers to protest against the Malaysian and Vietnamese governments for alleged cruel treatment, "it makes it difficult for us," Ba Hung claimed. DAS Marciel replied that the images conveyed by Vietnamese officials forcibly evicting nuns from Bat Nha and blowing up crucifixes at Dong Chiem tarnish Vietnam's image as a reformer and undermine Vietnam's otherwise improving record on religious freedom. Ba Hung said the GVN wanted to do a better job of engaging the Vietnamese Diaspora abroad, especially in the U.S. He noted that a delegation led Chairman of the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Nguyen Thanh Son would travel to the U.S. later this year to meet with Vietnamese-Americans, especially "anti-Communist" groups.

19. (C) Ba Hung then raised the Father Ly case. He recalled Canada's offer last December to receive Father Ly and asked if Father Ly would leave Vietnam if released. The DCM noted that Father Ly consistently has said he does not want to leave Vietnam; Ba Hung countered that perhaps arrangements could be made to allow him to leave Vietnam temporarily to seek medical treatment and then return to jail in Vietnam. DAS Marciel reminded Ba Hung of the considerable high-level attention to Father Ly's case in the U.S.,

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and cautioned it would not be wise for him to die in prison in Vietnam. Ba Hung agreed.

110. (C) The DCM then asked "informally" about the possibility of allowing Le Cong Dinh to resettle in the U.S. on humanitarian grounds. Ba Hung replied "it is too early to talk about that one," given the political sensitivity surrounding this "high-profile" individual. Ba Hung reiterated the official GVN position - Dinh violated national security laws - and explained that the Ministry of Public Security had considerable evidence that he worked with others abroad, including Viet Tan, to overthrow the government. Ba Hung closed by stating that this case "must be handled very carefully to avoid rising tensions" in Vietnam, but concluded saying "we will work with you on this one."

111. (SBU) DAS Marciel and the DCM then urged the GVN to approve all pending position requests, arguing that inadequate Mission staffing made it difficult to move forward on other issues in the relationship. Ba Hung referred to a staffing cap "agreed to but not written down" (and unknown to Post) just after the turn of the century, but said the GVN inter-agency was "close" to submitting a recommendation on removing the cap to the PM. Ba Hung declined to give a timeframe for that move and demurred that some GVN officials and agencies still questioned the need for staff growth.

112. (U) DAS Marciel cleared this message.
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